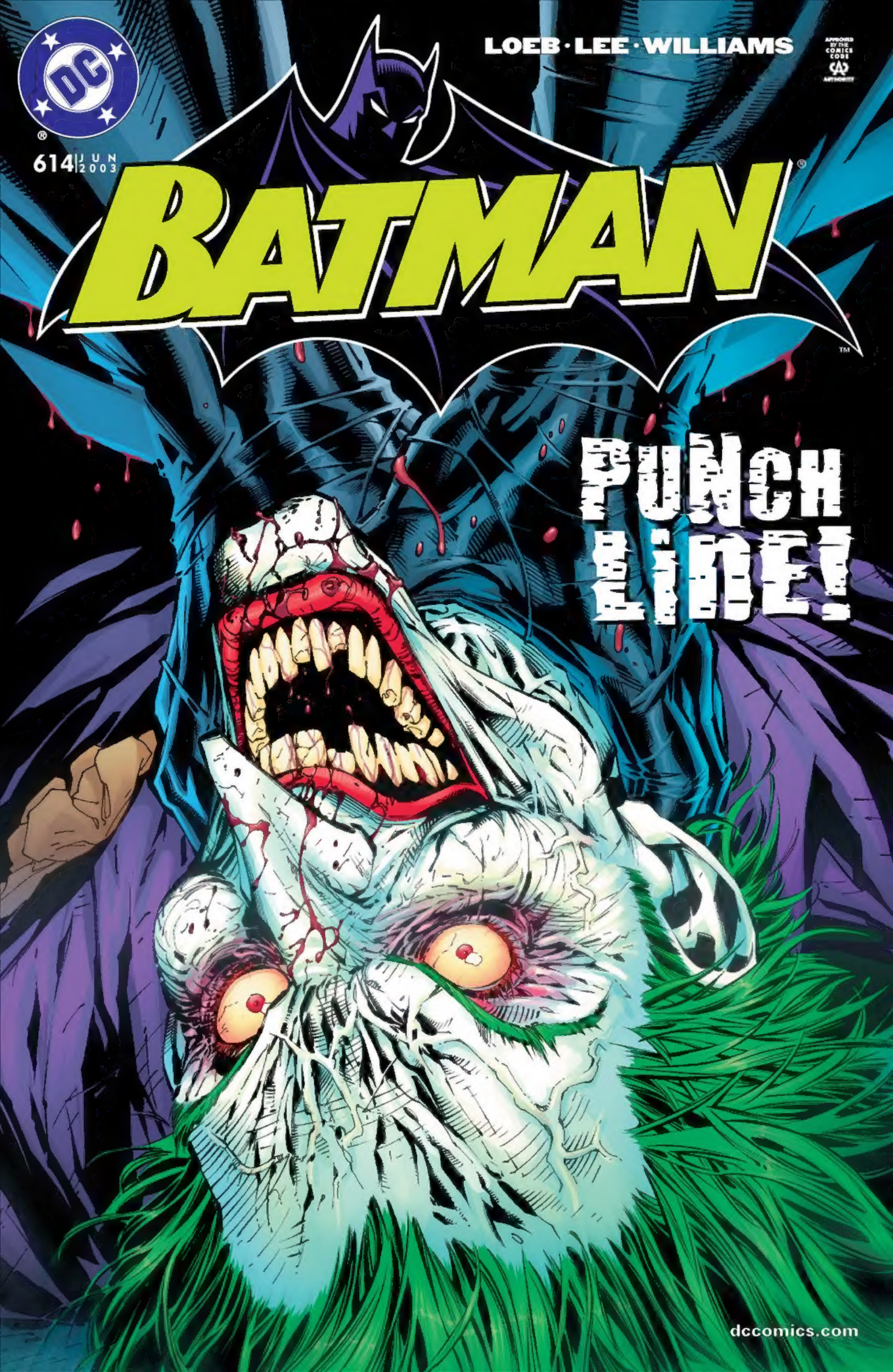
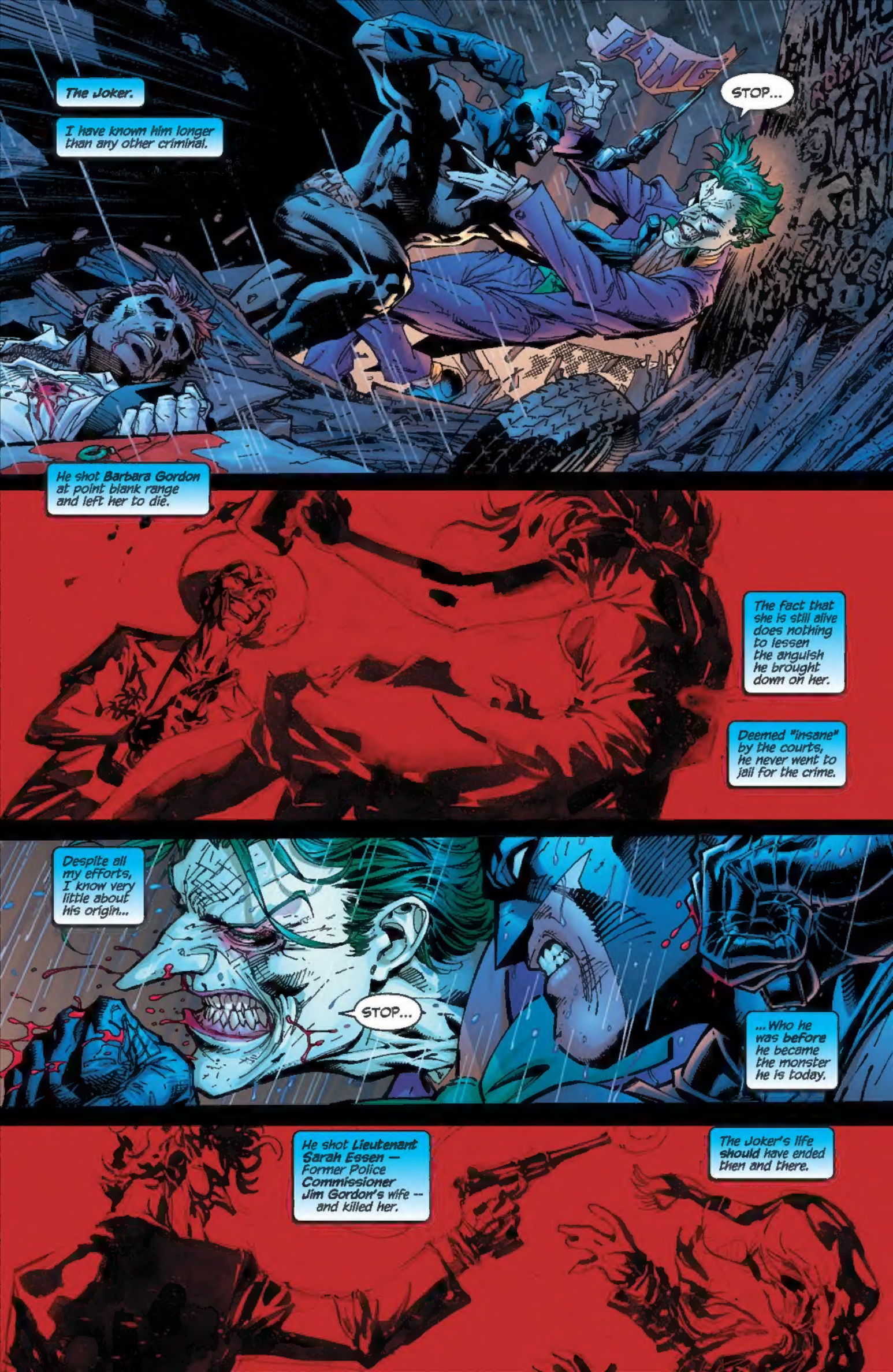

LOEB · LEE · WILLIAMS
APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY
614 JUN 2003
BATMAN
PUNCH LINE!
dccomics.com


The Joker.
I have known him longer than any other criminal.
BANG
STOP...
He shot Barbara Gordon at point blank range and left her to die.
The fact that she is still alive does nothing to lessen the anguish he brought down on her.
Deemed "insane" by the courts, he never went to jail for the crime.
Despite all my efforts, I know very little about his origin...
STOP...
...Who he was before he became the monster he is today.
He shot Lieutenant Sarah Essen — Former Police Commissioner Jim Gordon's wife -- and killed her.
The Joker's life should have ended then and there.

Dick. Dick Grayson. Nightwing. He explained to me once that The Joker and I are forever linked in constant battle.

STOP...

That in some sick way, The Joker exists because of me.

How I represent the order that is necessary to live in Gotham City and The Joker is the chaos that disrupts that order.

The Joker beat a child named Jason Todd to death for nothing more than wanting to be the young hero Robin, The Boy Wonder.

He walked away from any responsibility for that crime by using some bizarre "diplomatic immunity" he had obtained.

BANG

Only moments ago, The Joker took the life of a childhood friend.

Doctor Thomas Elliot — Tommy — returned to me as I lay dying. Without any hesitation, he used his skills as a surgeon.

I am alive today only because of him.

Now, Tommy is dead and The Joker killed him.

STOP...

I think about what Nightwing said. My being responsible for The Joker as years' worth of rage courses through my fist.

I cannot...
STOP...
STOP...
I will not...
...accept any responsibility...
STOP...
...for The Joker.
BATMAN...

I made a promise on the grave of my parents to rid this city of the evil that took their lives. By day, I am Bruce Wayne, billionaire philanthropist. At night, criminals, a cowardly and superstitious lot, call me...
BATMAN
CREATED BY BOB KANE
H.U.S.H.
Chapter Seven
THE JOKE
Except that I should have killed him long ago.
STOP...ME... IF YOU'VE HEARD THIS ONE BEFORE...
Jeph LOEB writes
Jim LEE pencils
Scott WILLIAMS inks
Richard STARKINGS letters
Alex SINCLAIR colors
Bob SCHRECK edits
Morgan DONTANVILLE assistant edits
special thanks to Mark CHIARELLO

...BATMAN... I... I...
I'M INNOCENT.
SSSH!
YA SEE... I DIDN'T KILL THIS GUY.
HEH.
I can hear his confession, but it means nothing.

Harley Quinn
OOPSIE!
YARRGH!
HEH-HEH. SORRY, MR. J! HE...UH... DUCKED!
WHAM
GET AWAY FROM 'IM, YA BIG GALOOT!
IF MY GUY SAYS HE'S INNOCENT, THEN HE'S INNOCENT!
RIGHT, PUDDIN'?
In some perverse way she loves him.
ERGL.
I will let no one — nothing —
KRASH
OUCHY...
-- defend The Joker or his actions.

I'M...(ACK) I'M NOT JOKING, BATBOOB.
CHECK... CHECK MY GUN... NOTHING (GAH) BUT BLANKS...!
It's just another lie. Another lie to keep himself alive.

I think of Barbara...
...and snapping the Joker's neck becomes that much easier...

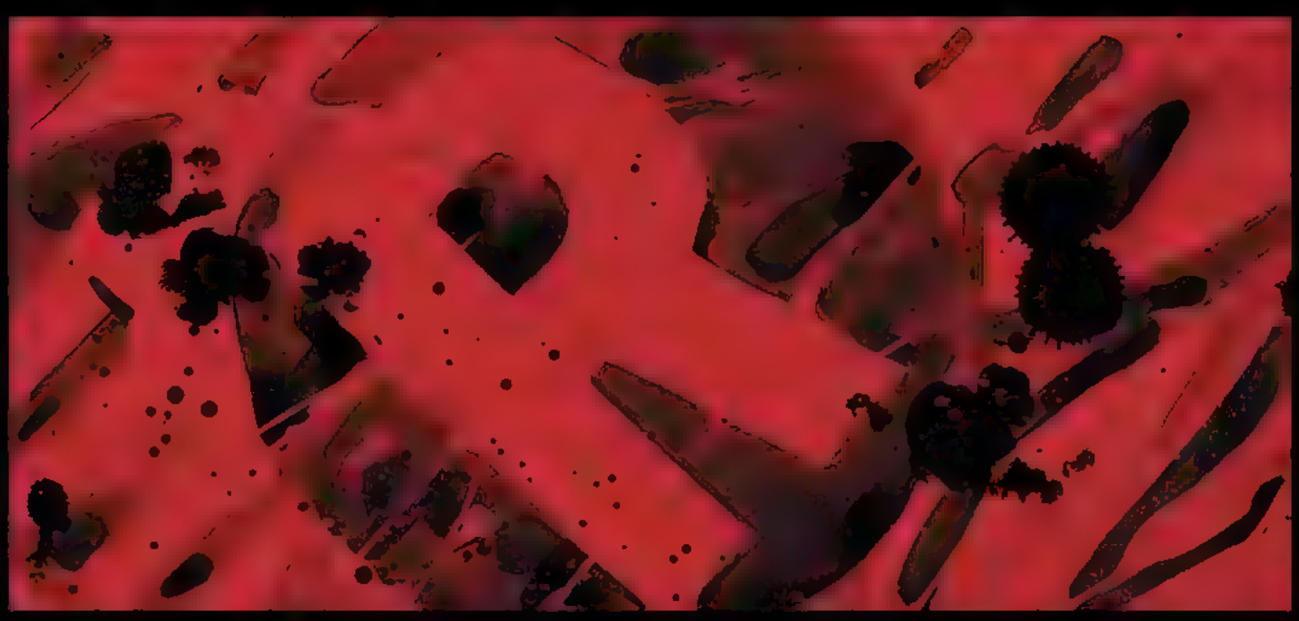
Batgirl.
She loved the job. Possibly even more than Dick did as Robin.
And I indulged her, maybe out of respect for her father.
I understood her... addiction to seeking out justice.
To rid this city of the evil that manifests itself here.
Even though she knew the risks...

Still haunted by that single moment...
...She cannot give it up. Even without the use of her legs.
She is invaluable to me in her role as Oracle...
And I tell myself that Barbara would understand what I have to do tonight.

NO!
I DON'T WANT TO FIGHT YOU.
Catwoman. Selina.
Earlier tonight, Harley Quinn shot her. Her shoulder is still damp with blood.
I'LL DO WHAT I HAVE TO TO KEEP YOU FROM DOING SOMETHING YOU'LL ONLY REGRET.
How could I regret what should have been done a long time ago?

How could she understand?
DON'T --!
GAH -- DAMMIT!
I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE FEELING.
BUT, IF OUR ROLES WERE REVERSED, YOU WOULD DO EVERYTHING IN YOUR POWER TO STOP ME.
SKRCH
She wasn't there when I found...
Jason.

Jason never had the skills that Dick had.
I should never have let him put on the costume.
No matter what differences we've had through the years, I've always known that Dick had a gift.
Jason only had... rage.
And I thought... hoped... that if I could channel that rage into something more productive...
For these reasons, I've carried the burden of responsibility for Jason's death.
When it was... is... The Joker's fault. His price to pay.



GAHHHH!
Whatever feelings I may have for you, Selina -- and that is very complicated right now --
-- I cannot let you stop me.
Her bullet wound makes her vulnerable and I exploit it.
And I tell myself she will understand someday...
Selina...

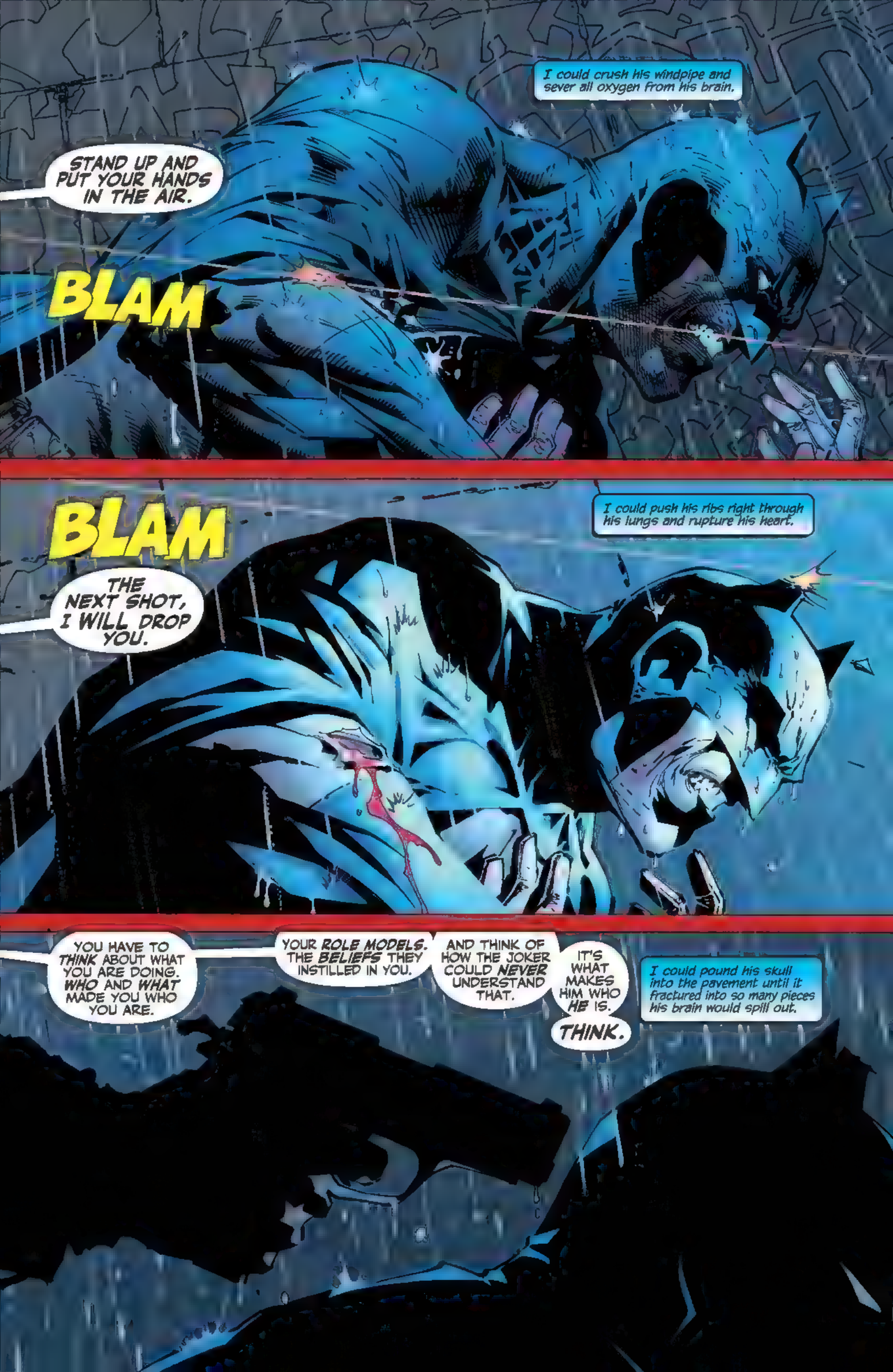
...Don't you see that our relationship only allows for the possibility that one night...
...it will be you that I find killed by The Joker?
I cannot... will not ... allow that nightmare to become a reality.

He dies tonight by my hand.
KRAKA THOOM
HELLLLLP!
WILDMAN!
MADMAN!
BATTYMAN!
There will be no escape.

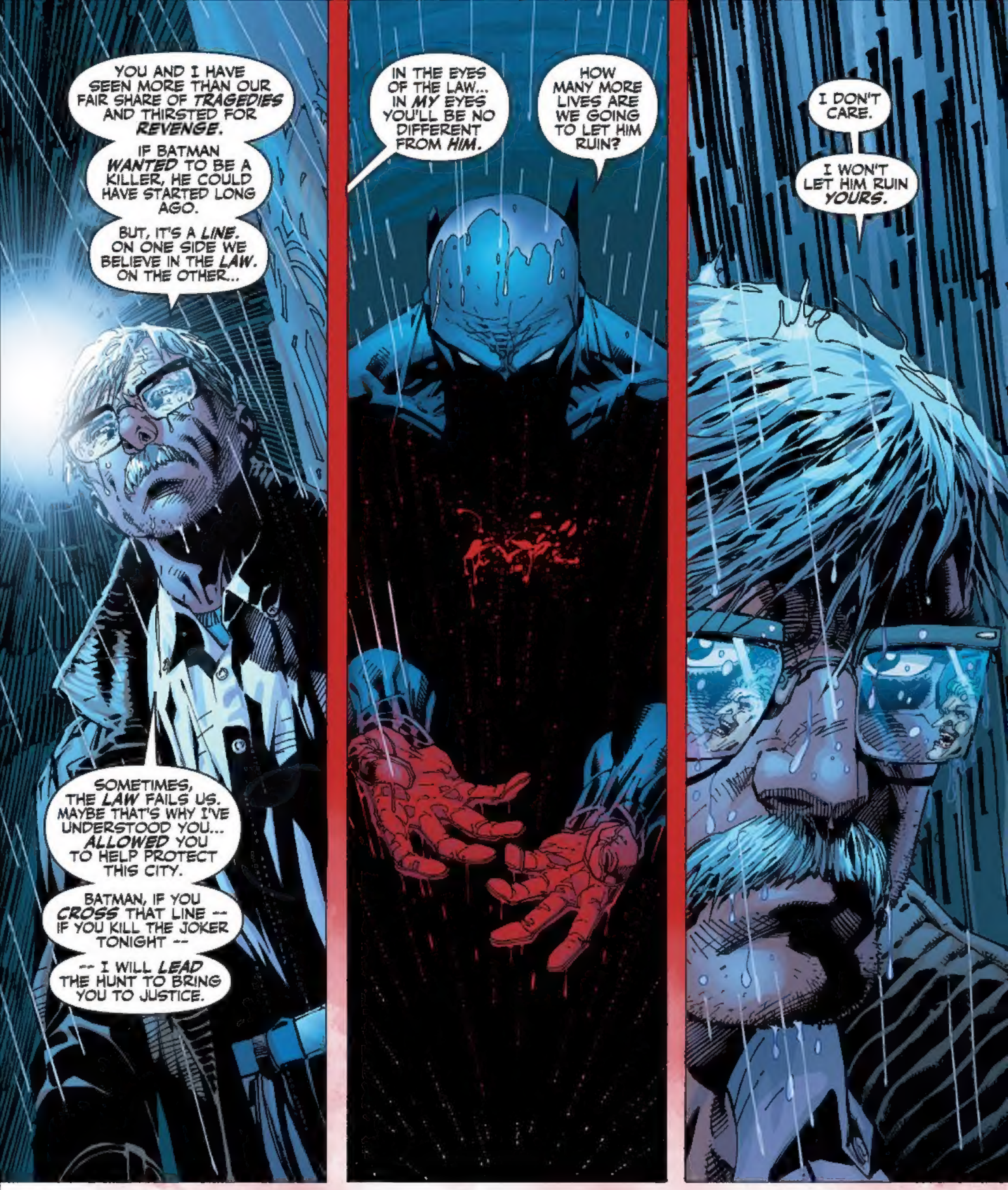
NO
NO!
NOOOOOo!

There is nothing I can do to him that would cause him the agony that he has brought upon others.

But I can come close.


I could crush his windpipe and sever all oxygen from his brain.
STAND UP AND PUT YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR.
BLAM
BLAM
I could push his ribs right through his lungs and rupture his heart.
THE NEXT SHOT, I WILL DROP YOU.
YOU HAVE TO THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU ARE DOING. WHO AND WHAT MADE YOU WHO YOU ARE.
YOUR ROLE MODELS. THE BELIEFS THEY INSTILLED IN YOU.
AND THINK OF HOW THE JOKER COULD NEVER UNDERSTAND THAT.
IT'S WHAT MAKES HIM WHO HE IS.
THINK.
I could pound his skull into the pavement until it fractured into so many pieces his brain would spill out.

...
GOD HELP ME...
...YOU HAVE THOUGHT THIS THROUGH.
It is what should have been done a long time ago.
I MAY NO LONGER CARRY A BADGE, BUT I STILL BELIEVE IN THE POLICEMAN'S OATH TO PROTECT AND SERVE.
ALL I CAN DO IS APPEAL TO YOU THROUGH OUR FRIENDSHIP.
I WOULDN'T LET YOU DO THIS WHEN HE SHOT MY DAUGHTER...KILLED MY WIFE.
I DON'T KNOW HOW I COULD STOP YOU, BUT I WON'T LET YOU THROW YOUR LIFE AWAY.
Jim Gordon. With all he's lost... I thought... he'd understand.
JIM...


YOU AND I HAVE SEEN MORE THAN OUR FAIR SHARE OF TRAGEDIES AND THIRSTED FOR REVENGE.
IF BATMAN WANTED TO BE A KILLER, HE COULD HAVE STARTED LONG AGO.
BUT, IT'S A LINE. ON ONE SIDE WE BELIEVE IN THE LAW. ON THE OTHER...
SOMETIMES, THE LAW FAILS US. MAYBE THAT'S WHY I'VE UNDERSTOOD YOU... ALLOWED YOU TO HELP PROTECT THIS CITY.
BATMAN, IF YOU CROSS THAT LINE -- IF YOU KILL THE JOKER TONIGHT --
-- I WILL LEAD THE HUNT TO BRING YOU TO JUSTICE.
IN THE EYES OF THE LAW... IN MY EYES YOU'LL BE NO DIFFERENT FROM HIM.
HOW MANY MORE LIVES ARE WE GOING TO LET HIM RUIN?
I DON'T CARE.
I WON'T LET HIM RUIN YOURS.

I'M INNOCENT.

It was from an alley like this one that a man with a gun emerged from the darkness and murdered my mother and father.
In that single moment, my childhood ended.

I made a promise on the grave of my parents that I would rid this city of the evil that took their lives.
Tonight... I nearly became a part of that evil...

HE IS INNOCENT.
FWAP
GET THE JOKE?
to be continued

RAZAN
EMPIRE